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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study of 40 student teachers and their cooperating teachers. The initiatives were implemented during one semester in various public school classrooms and sites. Most occurred with preschool and elementary students, with 10 of the student teachers in junior high or high school settings. The preservice teachers had a university requirement to do a daily journal entry. These journals were shared at seminars and a compilation of learned outcomes became part of this study. The teachers in this study reported that preservice teachers gained knowledge of citizenship and developed skills in teamwork, communication, and problem solving. Their academic skills were also sharpened as higher levels of thinking processes were generated as a result of practicing cooperative efforts. Preservice teachers found that difficulties arose regarding implementation: some were related to the planning process, agencies had difficulty in organizing activities, and obtaining parental permission forms was problematic. Overall, participants agreed that implementing an effective initiative creates a kinship that permeates the community while helping individuals become better skilled. (Contains 24 references.) (JLS)

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COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AND SERVICE LEARNING

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COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AND SERVICE LEARNING

Community initiatives that infuse the service learning curriculum and link the community have the powerful energy of generating a sound knowledge base while establishing a sense of shared pride. According to Fertman (1994), these initiatives engage students in opportunities where academics and practical experiences connect to focus on specific needs of the community.

Results from implementing community initiatives have been determined from a study with 40 student teachers and their cooperating teachers. The initiatives were implemented throughout a semester in various public school classrooms and sites. The majority of the initiatives occurred with preschool and elementary children while ten of these student teachers were in junior high or senior high settings. The purpose of exploring the process these educators experienced is to provide insights so that future service learning endeavors are successful.

TYPES OF INITIATIVES

Community initiatives can be implemented from many different perspectives. The basic focus is first to identify a need within the community (Checkley, 1997; Haskvitz, 1996; Buchen, 1995; Donovan, 1995; Wade, 1995). Initiatives that have been tried with success range from playground and recreational projects to cross generational initiatives. One example of a cross-generational initiative included preschoolers who were transported to a retirement village to teach the residents how to make a variety of holiday decorations.

Another example of linking the community was a literacy initiative where the culminating event was a read-to-me pajama party. Over three hundred students and their parents came to the

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school in night gear. The principal read to the students, student teachers and their cooperating teachers prepared skits, parents shared tips on promoting literacy, and students showed talents which related to their favorite books. Similar to other projects, some students "tutored and worked in AIDS awareness" (Sommerfield, 1994, p. 2.) while others worked with various populations of the elderly, at-risk, or specific agencies.

PLANNING

When it comes to planning an initiative, cooperating teachers and student teachers strongly urge that classroom students be given "a voice" in this process. Lewis (1996) and Donovan (1995, p. 24) emphatically state that students must assist with this process. To have the "maximum benefit, it is critical for students to be responsible for carrying out their projects." Students like making decisions, and take extra pride in their presenting their ideas. All of this creates ownership and indicates that students can be their own resources.

Feedback from both groups of educators indicates that developing an overview of the initiative excites the learners and gives the students a projected map to follow which captures the opportunities for goal development, problem solving, critical thinking, and multicultural connections. Thus, establishing objectives is critical, while recognizing that the need for the design of the initiative to extend into and enhance the students' lives is equally important. Therefore, the stated need and established objectives, with clearly stated criteria, monitors the success of the initiative.

While promoting community initiatives, it is suggested to plan utilizing the resources within the school and community. These resources can be other faculty, guest speakers,

technology, and/or supplemental aides. Tapping the local resources assists with keeping the monetary expenses down for implementing the initiative. It is during the planning stage that teachers should inform parents and other community members about the initiative while encouraging their participation. Information can be in the form of a letter or brochure, but whatever form it takes, it is critical that the information be shared.

IMPLEMENTING

Teachers should be alerted to the manual labors involved with implementing these initiatives. Additional time is required for working with large, as well as small groups, and for developing assessment techniques to name a few concerns.. It is also suggested that teachers be equipped with alternative avenues if possible complications develop.

The initiative should be enhanced by news media coverage. Whatever form of media is selected, it must occur so that the community observes the outcomes of the learning process. Another strong recommendation is implementing a culminating event (Fertman, 1994). This can be any type of celebration that exhibits learned outcomes. Examples of celebrations from this study include a portfolio fair, essay readings, and slide/photo exhibitions. Any forum for showcasing students' works must be utilized. While students have the opportunity to showcase their projects, this also enhances their visibility in the community. This continues to prepare them for them for their role in community life.

When being implemented, an initiative should have results that effect change. The change that occurs is as important as the initiative itself. Donovan (1994) relates that "the change could be raising the school's or community's awareness..., educating through specific messages..., or

advocating for ...prevention and programs" (p. 24).

According to Kohlmoos (1995, p. 43), an initiative is "change." Instead of laboring over a definition, he suggests the focus remains on designing new efforts to bridge the gap between the needs within the community and the educational entities ready to implement these efforts.

TIME

The educational literature shows different approaches when it comes to the time frames for implementing an initiative. Buchen (1995, p. 66) states that these initiatives can be long-term and that, therein, lies the endorsement of these efforts. "Teachers are frequently not aware that, with appropriate long-term structuring," these initiatives can exhibit "developmental stages that feed into patterns of academic growth." Recognizing these developmental stages can help students recognize significant relationships to the content being taught. Splittgerber and Allen (1996, p.216) discuss how, with an organized learning community approach, students can see the relationships from subject to subject and to "problems of the real world." In this way, the long-term initiative can embellish the curriculum and be a motivator for academics.

The time frame for this group of student teachers and cooperating teachers was one semester. However, some cooperating teachers continued with the initiatives for extended periods of time. Donovan (1995) recommends that initiatives be completed in one semester. The initiatives are "most effective and instructive when they can be planned and executed in one semester" (p.25). While not thoroughly eliminating initiatives that go beyond one semester, the author states that students see the "completion" and this helps them recognize that the "planning process remains manageable." These efforts can serve as motivators to pursue other initiatives.

ASSESSMENT

Using variety is crucial when selecting appropriate assessment procedures for the students. Encouraging the students to demonstrate different ways that they accomplished the learning objectives must be implemented. All of this can be demonstrated in various ways.

Teachers must limit the boundaries while developing ways to evaluate the overall initiative. Particularly important is having students involved in the evaluation process. Barclay and Benelli (1995/96, p. 91) emphasize how children are able to "judge the quality" of the educational programs, while at the same time being the variable sources. Incorporating feedback from the community (Haskvitz, 1996), in addition to feedback from parents, develops an insightful evaluation process.

BENEFITS AND DIFFICULTIES

This group of teachers had favorable responses for the initiatives that were implemented in their classrooms and at various sites. The benefits outweighed the difficulties.

These benefits were interfaced with the three patterns described by Kelenko, Porter, Wheatley, and Colby (1996). These patterns are: 1) understanding of social issues, 2) application of skills, and 3) personal insight. While searching for pedagogical effectiveness, many benefits emerged in conjunction with the initiatives. Social issues, such as diversity and multiculturalism, evolved. These student teachers and their cooperating teachers recognized that "students became educated about citizenship... and developed skills in teamwork, communication, and problem solving" (Teir & Goldsmith (1995, p. 35). Academic skills were sharpened as the learners generated higher levels of thinking processes while practicing cooperative efforts. Talents were

developed by all individuals in the classroom, including the teachers, and all abilities of students were identified. From at-risk students to gifted students, fulfillment emerged as these students learned how to reach out and help others. According to Lewis (1995, p.70), when these initiatives become connected to learning, benefits occur to "students of all academic abilities." As in other researcher studies, self-esteem, tolerance, empathy, responsibility, leadership, and career opportunities were noticeable results (Fertman, 1994; Lewis, 1995; Donovan, 1995; Goldsmith, 1995).

Some difficulties were encountered with implementing the initiatives. Depending upon the initiative, some teachers had challenges in the planning stages. While these obstacles were overcome, some agencies had difficulties with organizing activities to assist certain classes. Safety concerns were raised in regard to various factors on playgrounds and other sites. Parental permission forms continue to be priorities when implementing an initiative. The findings of this study lend support to the idea that the benefits far outweigh the challenges encountered.

REFLECTION

Personal insight, as noted by Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby (1996), is one of the elements that should be embedded in these initiatives. Others researchers (Checkoway, 1996; Schine, 1995; Fertman, 1994) attest to this same conclusion. Wade, (1995, p. 127) states that "students need to be encouraged to reflect on the connection between their service activities, the curriculum, and active citizenship." Students should begin to examine the "underlying social, political, and economic issues inherent in societal problems."

The student teachers involved during the semester had a university requirement to do a

daily entry. Each day they had to cite on incident that occurred and analyze the happening by writing a one sentence statement beginning with "I learned" that encompassed what they derived from the experience. These were shared at seminars and a compilation of learned outcomes became part of the study.

Many student teachers and their cooperating teachers had the classroom students keep journals. If teachers are requiring journal entries, it is in the best interest of the initiative that students be guided through this process.

Anderson (1995, p. 38) recommends the following questions for guiding students through this process:

* Describe what you did today.
* What did you enjoy doing?
* What did you avoid doing?
* What did you feel about yourself and what you did?
* What did you learn about yourself or others?
* What events did you specifically remember?
* What patterns are forming through your experiences?
* Comment upon any other feeling that you have.

Personal insight can take other forms of reflecting about the experience. Besides keeping a journal, participation in discussion, a report, or a presentation are options (Thompson, 1995). Other possibilities that work are videos, photographs, plays, and cassette recordings (Lewis, 1996). The goal is that students connect their learning to their environment. They must see the

relationship to the real world and recognize the impact of their participation. Only in this way will reinforcement and commitment continue to help students realize they have the power to shape their futures.

CONCLUSION

According to the teachers involved, the adoption of a community initiative is a worthwhile effort. Personal satisfaction is the product of observing all ability levels succeed and enjoy learning. Cooperation is bolstered by interaction from outside resources, cross-grades, and cross-generational activities. These teachers agree that implementing an effective initiative creates a kinship that permeates the community atmosphere while helping individuals become better skilled.

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